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American Red Cross  
A Brief History of the Nutrition Service

The American Red Cross was incorporated by an act of Congress on June 6, 1900, and reincorporated on January 5, 1905, to carry out the purposes of the Treaty of Geneva and "to furnish volunteer aid to the sick and wounded of armies in time of war, ... to act in matters of voluntary relief and in accord with the military and naval authorities as a medium of communication between the people of the United States of America and their Army and Navy, ... to continue and carry on a system of national and international relief in time of peace and apply the same in mitigating the suffering caused by pestilence, famine, fire, floods, and other great national calamities, and to devise and carry on measures for preventing the same."

Interpreting the terms of this charter broadly, the Red Cross entered the field of nutrition education in 1908, when it authorized classes in dietetics and household economy. In 1917, a Bureau of Dietitians Service was established and a National Advisory Committee on Red Cross Dietitians Service authorized. This committee, composed of leaders in the field of home economics and dietetics, recruited dietitians to serve in the Army and Navy and the American Red Cross commissions overseas, and to serve as instructors of the Red Cross Home Dietetics Course. The course offered instruction in food conservation and other wartime food measures. During 1917-18 the Red Cross recruited 2,387 dietitians, of whom 509 served as hospital dietitians and 1,878 as instructors.

Before and during this period many Red Cross chapters as an emergency measure were furnishing free milk and hot lunches to school children, and in some cases providing hot lunch equipment. Other chapters attempted to give instruction in nutrition. But there was not, at that time, a real chapter nutrition program. Community leaders interested in education, social work, and public health urged the Red Cross, as a quasi-governmental agency interested in establishing services needed by the public, to include nutrition education as a part of its prescribed program. As a result, the National Advisory Committee on Red Cross Dietitians Service recommended an enlargement of nutrition activities. In 1920 the name of the Bureau of Dietitians Service was changed to Bureau of Nutrition Service and a year later the Red Cross Nutrition Service was set up under a national director. With the appointment of area directors of nutrition and authorized chapter nutritionists and instructors, Red Cross chapter nutrition programs were established on a sound educational basis.

The Red Cross Nutrition Service, under the guidance of the National Advisory Committee, pioneered in the demonstration and establishment of community nutrition programs, the goal being to promote individual and community health and well-being. Under the leadership of Red Cross chapters, public spirited citizens were able to inaugurate nutrition activities and continue them until they could be turned over to the proper public authorities to be permanently maintained from public funds. When community resources were inadequate to support a permanent nutrition service, Red Cross chapters were advised not to attempt to develop a Nutrition Service.

Chapters were encouraged to employ nutritionists for a 12-month period if they were financially able to do so. When, however, a full-time program was not possible because of lack of funds or lack of consciousness of the need for a full-time program, chapters were encouraged to introduce itinerant services. Under this plan two or more chapters cooperated in the employment of a nutritionist, each chapter planning a suitable follow-up program to be carried on by the chapter nutrition committee for the part of the year it was without the services of the nutritionist.

The work of volunteer professional workers in home economics and nutrition as authorized nutrition instructors was inaugurated with the objective of having their work lead to the employment of full-time nutritionists. An increasing number of chapters have followed this scheme successfully.

The general field representative was responsible for organizing chapters for the activities which composed the program of the Red Cross and was responsible for promoting those activities. Either this representative or the nutrition field representative presented the Red Cross nutrition program to the chapter board of directors, because it had manifested an interest in or shown a need for nutrition work, or in other cases, because from observation and investigation of the local situation, the field representative felt there was a need not recognized by the community.

As a result of these efforts, from 1924 to 1932 Red Cross chapter nutrition programs were carried in 252 counties in 39 States, reaching three-quarters of a million school children with regular class instruction in nutrition and nearly 100,000 adults through classes. In addition, many were reached through home visits and conferences. Thirty-two colleges and universities gave elementary and secondary school teachers in local communities extension credit for the Red Cross Nutrition Course for teachers taught by a Red Cross nutritionist.

Records are not available for a study of the growth of Red Cross Nutrition Service in all areas during this period. Information on developments in eastern area, comprising 21 States at that time, showed that from July 1, 1921, to July 1, 1930, there had been 83 Nutrition Services conducted by a paid nutritionist; 27 of these Services were discontinued; 19 were taken over by public agencies, most of which were tax-supported; and 37 were retained as Red Cross Nutrition Services.

What educators think of Red Cross nutrition work is well illustrated by an article on "Our Children and Their Nutrition Needs" by Mary Swartz Rose in the Teachers College Record for February 1932, vol. XXXIII, No. 5, in which the following statement is made in reference to the Red Cross: "It has done outstanding pioneer work in developing the nutritionist--a new type of educator. We hope that nutrition will be a Red Cross responsibility until every community has its nutrition service as a part of community education."

On March 4, 1932, due to greatly restricted finances, the budget committee of the Red Cross recommended that the national Nutrition Service be closed at the end of the fiscal year on June 30. The chairman approved the recommendation. Nutrition Service then became exclusively an activity of the local chapters. The Nutrition Service positions at national and the area offices were discontinued. A nutrition consultant, however, was maintained at national headquarters for the administrative group and Service heads of the national and area offices and for the chapters and the Red Cross food and nutrition activities conducted by nutritionists and authorized instructors were continued under her supervision.

From 1932 to 1941, 52 to 121 chapters a year carried nutrition activities directed by 23 chapter nutritionists and 1,866 authorized nutrition instructors. By these efforts 44,534 persons were reached. In March 1936, the Newton, Mass., Red Cross Chapter completed a successful 3-year demonstration of the value of a community nutritionist. The service is now a permanent part of the community health program and is supported by benefiting private



agencies in the city. In February 1937, 19 dietitians and nutritionists were assigned to regional and local Red Cross disaster offices for mass feeding operations and other food relief measures during the Ohio and Mississippi Valley Flood. In January 1940 the Buchanan Co. Chapter, St. Joseph, Mo., transferred its full-time community nutrition program which it had carried for 18 years to the Community Chest.

In 1941 the national defense program stimulated local groups to do something for better nutrition. Red Cross chapters began to feel the new surge of interest, for there was a marked increase in request for nutrition classes. Following the National Nutrition Conference for Defense in May 1941 the Administrator of Defense Health and Welfare Services, on the recommendation of State nutrition committees assembled during the conference, urged the Red Cross to enlarge the scope of its nutrition service under trained nutritionists in chapters. These developments necessitated the reestablishment of a Nutrition Service staff at the national and area offices.

The present-day organization of Red Cross includes a national headquarters and five area offices. In each area office, a director of Nutrition Service, assistant director, and nutrition field representatives work with the director and assistant director at national headquarters in organizing, developing, and administering chapter nutrition programs.

The Nutrition Service staff at national headquarters is responsible for the development of general policies, for liaison relations with governmental and other national agencies and groups, for the development of promotional and teaching materials, and for the general planning, organizing, and coordinating of activities carried by the Nutrition Service.

The Nutrition Service staff at the area offices is responsible for guidance and technical assistance to Red Cross chapter nutrition committees in developing Red Cross chapter nutrition programs. This responsibility is met through correspondence; chapter visits, institutes, or workshops; conferences; news letters, or bulletins; and informational, promotional, and educational materials. The area staffs are responsible for liaison of regional and State agencies with governmental and other regional and State agencies and groups.

The Red Cross chapter nutrition committee is organized with a view to having a cross-section representation from lay groups and allied professional groups. The committee is responsible for sponsoring the Red Cross chapter nutrition program. The responsibility of determining how the program should be developed to meet community needs is jointly that of the chapter nutrition committee and the area Nutrition Service.

Every effort is made to adapt subject matter and procedure to a pattern best fitting a community's needs. The chapter nutrition work is carried by means of a full-time or part-time paid Red Cross nutritionist with authorized nutrition instructors serving on a volunteer or paid basis, or by means of authorized nutrition instructors serving on a volunteer or paid basis. One area office recently reestablished on a trial basis itinerant nutrition teaching services to chapters in which there are no available professional nutrition resources. The itinerant nutrition instructor is employed by the area office and assigned to chapters desiring her assistance for a period of 2 or 3 months. If this trial proves successful the same type of service may be extended to the other area offices.

An increasing number of lay volunteer nutrition aides who have completed the Red Cross 20-hour Standard Nutrition Course are being used by chapter nutrition committees. They assist in the nontechnical phases of the program, such as demonstrations, exhibits, promotional talks, showing of films, assisting at Red Cross food and nutrition information centers, food preservation centers, and the development of illustrative materials.

From July 1, 1941, to the end of the fiscal year June 30, 1944, the number of Red Cross chapters carrying nutrition activities increased from 121 to 2,327; the number of authorized instructors of Red Cross courses from 271 to 19,447; and the number of chapters engaging one or more nutritionists from 15 to 58. During this period 473,623 men and women were reached through Red Cross nutrition classes and 137,768 prepared by means of canteen and dietitians aide classes for community services relating to group feeding. In addition 226,711 persons were reached with food and nutrition information exclusive of classes by means of Red Cross food and nutrition information centers, food demonstrations, Red Cross food preservation centers, talks, consultations, educational displays, and exhibits.

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